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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000251

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SUBJECT: JUNTA UNILATERALLY APPOINTS ELECTORAL COMMISSION  
MEMBERS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) The junta took another step towards elections with the April 6 designation of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) president and members. Professor Cheikh Saad Bouh Camara, reputed Afro-Mauritanian sociologist, was appointed president while Hamdy Ould Mahjoub, former deputy mayor of Nouadhibou, was designated first vice president. Mahjoub is viewed as a coup supporter whereas Camara's acceptance of the appointment came as a surprise due to his reputation as a democrat and staunch human rights activist. The regime has not yet disclosed the official member list but Arabic websites cited 14 other names that included four 2005-2007 CENI members. The new CENI is composed in its majority of Moors but has solid Afro-Mauritanian and Haratine representation. Mauritians had been looking forward to these appointments, which were seen as setting the tone of the June 6 election. CENI designation was far from consensual as it was done without the participation of main political parties (Ould Daddah's RFD and the FNDD refused to play along), labor unions, and civil society.

¶2. (C) PolOff met April 6 with Professor Camara, a long-time Embassy contact, to inquire about press reports designating him as potential CENI president. The media reported on junta ambivalence about naming Camara because, even though he was the most competent candidate, many felt that he would be "an Afro-Mauritanian too many" in the establishment. (Note: Current President of the Senate Ba M'bare, who will supposedly lead the government when Aziz steps down to run for president, is also an Afro-Mauritanian. It should be noted that Professor Camara is half Afro-Mauritanian, half Haratine. End note.) Camara repeatedly denied having been approached by the junta. He stated he was open to dialogue and had a list of conditions that, if met, could make him accept. He promised he would disclose that information at a later date. Comment: Just after PolOff met with professor Camara, Arabic-language press reported his confirmation as CENI president. There's little doubt that Professor Camara had already accepted the position before meeting with PolOff. Political LES later said that Camara had been spotted visiting the Ministry of the Interior on numerous occasions. They claim his CENI presidency "was something he had been pursuing quite aggressively." End comment.

¶3. (C) Camara described the CENI designation process as a "power struggle". He mentioned that neutral individuals like him "bothered" anti-coup supporters because their participation in the election could give credibility to the process. His potential designation as CENI president, he said, also threatened pan-Arabist pro-coup supporters like Nasserists and Baathists who were afraid of Afro-Mauritanians taking power and having a voice.

¶4. (C) Camara advised PolOff to take "nothing for granted." According to him, the June 6 election date is not a given and neither is Aziz's candidacy or his electoral victory. He stated he believed the election could be transparent and that it could become an opportunity for the renewal of Mauritania's political class. He highlighted the potential presidential candidacy of RFD vice-president Kane Hamidou Baba, an Afro-Mauritanian who many think will leave the RFD to form his own political party. According to Camara, Baba's candidacy could "change everything." Camara described Mauritanian voters as "free electrons," who were fickle in their support to candidates. "Everything can change overnight," he intimated as he stressed that "Mauritanians don't think like Westerners."

¶5. (C) Comment: If the CENI creation process foreshadows the election, we have good cause to think the election will be unilateral -- but also potentially full of surprises. Camara's designation as CENI president is an obvious attempt by the junta to legitimize the electoral process but the

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reasons for his acceptance remain a mystery. In his meeting with PolOff, Camara openly criticized the junta for cracking down on protesters. It is strange that a human rights activist accepts to participate in and provide legitimacy to the elections planned by a military regime that violates civil liberties. Perhaps he has sold out or he thinks he can single-handedly ensure electoral transparency. Camara doubts the election will take place in June and said Aziz's candidacy is not a given. Camara had previously headed one of the working groups in the General's Etats Generaux de Democratie saying, initially, that he wanted to fight the coup from within but, in the end, admitting that the framework of the operation made it impossible to get a legitimate outcome. He seems ready to do it again, but for higher stakes. The possibility of Aziz rescheduling the elections should not be ruled out. He may even use that extra time to attempt to achieve consensus now that he's facing strong international community and internal opposition. End comment.

HANKINS